

**Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Operation Iraqi Freedom
and Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans and Families**

Public Meeting: September 11, 2007, Minneapolis VA Medical Center, Minneapolis,
Minnesota

Attendees:

Lt. General David Barno (ret.), Committee Chair

Ron Thomas, Designated Federal Official

Committee Members (alphabetical order):

Elizabeth Biggers

Pam Estes

Frances Hackett

Dawn Halfaker

Kimberly Hazelgrove

Tim McClain

Warren "Rocky" McPherson

Lonnie Moore

John Sommer, Jr.

Jack Tilley

Chris Yoder

Opening Remarks of Chairman Barno

Chairman David Barno opened the meeting with brief welcoming remarks. He expressed his enthusiasm concerning the presence of the full committee. Chairman Barno further highlighted the completion of the first 120 days and initial assessments by the committee. It is noted that the meeting is being videotaped for the record and to facilitate information sharing for the interested parties. Chairman Barno thanks the Mr. Steven Kleinglass, Director of the VAMC and his staff for hosting the meeting.

Opening Remarks by Mr. Steven Kleinglass

Mr. Kleinglass expressed his appreciation for the Advisory Committee's presence at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center. Mr. Kleinglass introduced key members of his staff: Robert A. Petzel, MD, Network Director (VISN 23); Dr. John Drucker, MD, Chief of Staff; Arthur D. Smith, National Cemetery Director in Minneapolis. Mr. Kleinglass then highlighted the working relationship between the Medical Center, Cemetery and Regional Office as well as others in the community. Mr. Kleinglass expressed his relationship to the events of September, 11, 2001; the Medical Center was evacuated due to a terror threat. Mr. Kleinglass provided some background information on the Medical Center, 2750 employees caring for 77,000 unique patients. He maintains the facility workload continues to grow yearly. Mr. Kleinglass expressed his pride in caring for 'America's newest Heroes'. He encourages the Committee to visit 4J (the Polytrauma Unit) and 1D (the Transitional Unit), talk with staff and family members to view the successes of the Medical Center.

Continued Opening Remarks by Chairman Barno

Chairman Barno gave brief remarks to stress the importance of the work the Medical Center does and establishing the connection of the sixth anniversary of September 11, 2001 to the Committee. Chairman Barno also noted the significance of the terror attacks and how the date has changed the way we view our lives. Chairman Barno honored Patriot Day (September 11, 2001) by reading Secretary R. James Nicholson remarks followed by a moment of silence. Chairman Barno invited the committee members to introduce themselves.

At the conclusion of the introductions Chairman Barno thanked the committee for their participation and sacrifice. Chairman Barno reviewed the agenda and highlighted key components, the deliverables and tentative schedule of the next plenary session. Chairman Barno suggested the Committee produce a report to the Secretary that describes emerging insights and provides strategic plan for the duration. Chairman Barno noted the purpose of the meeting was to identify best practices, compare notes from West and East Panels, and identify issues that require legislative change.

The agenda is provided as an attachment.

Secretary's remarks are provided as an attachment.

East Panel Brief

Captain Dawn Halfaker (Retired) began the presentation by reviewing the outline and presented the best practices noted by the panel. Pam Estes presented information on Polytrauma treatment and related topics. Warren 'Rocky' Mcpherson gave remarks on the National Guard and Reserve and their needs, requirements and benefits. Kimberly Hazelgrove gave remarks on research initiatives, female veterans, and survivor and dependent issues. Chris Yoder discussed the importance of outreach, education and employment. Kimberly Hazelgrove concluded the presentation by reviewing emerging trends and insights. A brief question and answer period followed the presentation.

The East Panel Brief is provided as an attachment.

Public Comment

Carolyn Sawyer, the facilitator opened the public comment session and established the basic rules of conduct. Yamira Dorff (Jamie) presented her testimony concerning her survivor status and the difficulty adjusting to the loss of her husband and the challenges of being a single parent. She was unaware of the available VA benefits except for a scholarship for dependents. She acknowledged receiving information concerning VA benefits immediately after the casualty. A brief question and answer period followed with specific questions relating to usage of the VA system, counseling services, and education of benefits.

Adjournment: Chairman Barno

Chairman Barno provided the members with an outline of the next day's activities and adjourned the meeting.

Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans and Families

Public Meeting: September 12, 2007, Minneapolis VA Medical Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Attendees:

Lt. General David Barno (ret.), Committee Chair

Ron Thomas, Designated Federal Official

Committee Members (alphabetical order):

Elizabeth Biggers

Pam Estes

Frances Hackett

Dawn Halfaker

Kimberly Hazelgrove

Caroline Maney

Warren "Rocky" McPherson

Lonnie Moore

John Sommer, Jr.

Chris Yoder

Remarks

Mr. Kleinglass introduced a video produced by the VAMC depicting current patients and their military experience. Each period of service from WWII to the current conflict was represented.

West Panel Brief

Lonnie Moore, West Panel Chair, introduced the sub committee, reviewed the locations visited by the panel and presented the best practices observed. John Sommer, Jr. presented observations concerning the National Guard and Reserve. Jack Tilley gave remarks concerning local issues specific to Las Vegas, Mental Health and research. Liza Biggers focused her presentation on issues relevant to female veterans, and dependents and survivors. Fran Hackett discussed observations and issues related to education and employment. Caroline Maney offered insight into topics related to the transition period of service members. Fran Hackett provided closing comments and shared emerging insights noted by the subcommittee.

Questions and Answers

A brief question and answer period followed the West Panel's presentation. Several members of the committee offered comments and questions covering numerous topics such as mental health, outreach and financial assistance. Chairman Barno offered some insights and highlighted the need to focus on topics within the scope of the charge. Chris Yoder gave insights on the design of the VA health system and the Millennium Act.

Chairman Barno reviewed the suggested report format, an interim report to the Secretary with these areas of focus:

1. Visits to date
2. Emerging insights
3. “Quick fixes”
4. First Look: Best Practices
5. Proposed strategic Plan
6. Future reporting plan

Update on the Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes Presentation

VA Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Policy, Mr. Ron Thomas, presented the Update of the Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes. The Task Force was established in May 2007 by President George W. Bush to examine existing federal services and benefits available to veterans. The Task Force submitted a report 45 days after first meeting (April 19, 2007) detailing its findings and offering recommendations to bridge gaps in available services.

Mr. Thomas highlighted four initiatives that are in progress as a result of the report.

- Military Treatment Facilities to assign a primary Case Manager to each service member being transferred to VA.
- VA expedited the processing of Adapted Housing and Special Home Adaptation Grant claims
- Small Business Administration announced the Patriot Express Loan Initiative for service members, veterans, and eligible dependents.
- Department of Labor and VA are working to develop a briefing on Operation Warfighter, an initiative that allows injured service members to gain work experience at federal agencies before leaving military service.

Mr. Thomas discussed a summary of available statistics on OIF/OEF veterans. He also presented healthcare utilization statistics according to general demographics, service branch, state of residence, and other indicators. Patient care cost and data related to disability claims were also reported.

The committee offered a few questions concerning data on specific populations within the OIF/OEF veteran cohort such as the number of DIC claims for OIF/OEF deceased service members. The timeliness of receiving disability compensation was presented as another area of concern.

Mr. Thomas’s presentation is provided as an attachment.

Legislative Update on VA Issues Presentation

The Honorable Thomas Harvey, VA Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs provided the Committee with an overview of the office’s functions and mission.

Mr. Harvey highlighted:

- Legislative process and procedure
- Veterans Suicide Prevention Bill
- Specific work of his office
- Wounded Warrior Legislation
- Veterans Claims Assistance Act
- Challenges of the appropriations process

A brief question and answer period followed the presentation addressing topics such as understanding VHA priority groups, and the legislative process for specific recommendations that the committee would address.

Vet Claims Act Presentation

Mr. Steve Simmons, Deputy Director of the Compensation and Pension Service gave an impromptu overview of the Veterans Claims Assistance Act. The law states that Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) has a duty to assist the veteran in filing a benefits claim as well as a duty to inform. VBA must inform the veteran the necessary information is required to ensure their claim is successful. Mr. Simmons provided insight into some the challenges faced by the Compensation and Pension Service in compliance with the Veterans Claims Assistance Act.

A brief question and answer period followed the presentation with a focus on gaining a better understand of the impact of the Veterans Claims Assistance Act and timeliness of the adjudication process.

Adjournment: Chairman Barno

Chairman Barno provided the committee members with the outline of the Thursday's activities and adjourned the meeting.

Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans and Families

Public Meeting: September 13, 2007, Minneapolis VA Medical Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Attendees:

Lt. General David Barno (ret.), Committee Chair

Ron Thomas, Designated Federal Official

Committee Members (alphabetical order):

Elizabeth Biggers

Pam Estes

Frances Hackett

Dawn Halfaker

Kimberly Hazelgrove

Caroline Maney

Warren “Rocky” McPherson

Lonnie Moore

John Sommer, Jr.

Chris Yoder

Opening:

Chairman Barno opened the meeting by discussing the agenda and the purpose of the working session. The working session established the strategic plan for the committee to effectively complete their charge.

Morning Working Session

Chairman Barno reviewed the format for the proposed report to the Secretary of VA.

1. Visits to date
2. Emerging insights
3. “Quick fixes”
4. First Look: Best Practices
5. Proposed strategic Plan
6. Future reporting plan

Proposed Panel Site Visits (Potential Options)

East Panel

1. Washington DC metro area:

- Late October
- Quantico, VA: discussions with survivors, employment transition
- Washington DC VAMC: Dental Clinic

Panel West

1. Ft. Riley, KS area:

- Oct 29-Nov 2
- Ft. Riley: Meet with mobile transitioning teams, roundtable with separating service members, tour of ACAP facilities, and tour of the hospital with the ability to see patients and family members.
- Town Hall at local National Guard Amory in Junction City or Manhattan
- Topeka: tour VAMC, meet with State Guard Commanders and NSO's
- Town Hall meeting at the State National Guard Headquarters
- Kansas City, MO; tour VAMC, roundtable with caseworkers, Nurse management and OIF/OEF patients

2. Seattle, WA: Ft. Lewis

3. Palo Alto, CA: to visit a Poly Trauma Center

4. Alaska: due to the concentration of OIF/OEF veterans and no presence of a VA hospital

5. Chicago

6. Hawaii: more information needed concerning the concentration of OIF/OEF veterans

7. Oklahoma

8. Denver, CO: to visit the hospital and Ft. Carson

NOTE: These sites were discussed as a partial list of future potential sites for visits.

The ensuing discussion consisted of ideas and topics to be used in an interim report to the Secretary.

Secretary's Guidance

- Treatment of service disabilities
- National Guard and Reserve issues
- Treatment for mental health and TBI problems
- Research targeted to OIF/OEF service
- Female OIF/OEF issues
- Family Issues (dependents and survivors)
- Education assistance and job training
- Transition benefits and services
- Other issues as identified:
 - Communication and administration

Big Themes

- Communication
 - Outreach
 - Feedback loops
 - Ongoing
- Families, survivors, female issues

- National Guard and Reserves
- Seamless transition, benefits, services, health care
- Treatment of mental health problems, TBI, PTSD
- Education and employment

Outline

Treatment of Severe Disabilities

- Family support
- Standardize legal requirements
- Timely access to care post transition
 - Continuity of care, military, VA, and local
 - Standards of care
 - Rural and underserved
 - Capability and capacity
 - Patient advocacy:
 - Is it working?
 - Look at the model
 - VBA interaction

National Guard and Reserve Issues

- Providing information, VHA and VBA
- Employment and re-employment
 - Small business issues
- IRR/ Individual augmentee
- Severely wounded
 - Medical holdover
 - Access to care
 - Medical care transition and education
- Analyze CBHCO model
- Family support and education

Treatment for Mental Health and TBI Issues

- Expand capability and capacity
- Continued training of service members
 - Overcoming the stigma
- VHA/Vet Center interaction/cooperation
- Vet Center authority for families
 - VHA capability/authority
- Communication and education on a broad spectrum
- Specific, focused outreach and sensitivity
- Long range treatment plans

Research Targeted to OIF/OEF Service

- PTSD – research, state of the art
- TBI – research, state of the art
- HO study
- Family member stress
- Communication research and results throughout VA
- Prosthetic research
- Lifetime research plan
- Effects of combat on health of females

Female OIF/OEF Issues

- Capability to provide separate wards/rooms for sexual trauma, mental illness
- Childcare needs while receiving medical treatment, outpatient
- Homelessness

Family Issues (caregivers, dependents, and survivors)

- Counseling and fiscal support
- Education on case specific benefits
 - Knowledge of disability
- Family reintegration – pre/post deployment
 - Follow up education
- Long term plan and benefits for caregivers, children and spouses
- Case management
- Better information/resource guide
 - Internal
 - External (websites, etc.)

Education Assistance and Job Training

- Vocational rehabilitation, focus on PTSD/TBI
- Leverage GI Bill/Vocational rehabilitation
- Comprehensive resource guide
- Earlier resume/interview assistance
- Higher education integration

Transition Benefits and Services

- VAAP model (a la San Diego) – open to veterans at any time with follow-up
- Timing
- Better VA integration into DoD, TAP, etc
- Technology capability (web, DVD, GPS)
- Spouses (need to get them involved)
- Post discharge briefing

Communication and Administration

- Consistency on legal matters
- VBA interaction
- National registry on OIF/OEF

- Plus definitions (severely injured, very seriously injured)
- Access and utilization/improvement – VA technology – blog

Other

- Continued communication – multiple mediums
- Metrics, reporting, monitoring
- Transfer of veteran data
- Legislative issues
 - VCAC
 - Millennium Act

Closing Remark

Chairman Barno introduced Deputy Secretary Gordon H. Mansfield. Deputy Secretary Mansfield expressed his sincere interest in the work the committee has been tasked to complete. Mr. Mansfield offered insight into his involvement with the Senior Oversight Committee, a collaborative effort with the Department of Defense. The Senior Oversight Committee is developing an action plan to implement recommendation from the Dole-Shalala report, specifically overall case management for injured service member.

Mr. Mansfield asked each committee member to share some of the insights they have received participating in committee activities. Mr. Mansfield stressed the importance of the Committee's work and how he will use their observations to improve services and benefits to veterans. The Deputy Secretary thanked the Committee members for their service and concluded his remarks.